Trump praises UK troops now as Nato comments row grows

COPENHAGEN: US President Donald Trump on Saturday appeared to offer an olive branch to Britain on Saturday in a row over the role of UK soldiers in Afghanistan, calling them "among the greatest of all warriors".

But other European countries have also reacted sharply to his comments discounting what Nato troops did in Afghanistan, with French President Emmanuel Macron the latest to comment on Saturday.

Trump had claimed Nato sent "some troops" but "stayed a little back, a little off the front lines", in an interview with *Fox News*. He also repeated suggestion that the alliance would not come to the aid of the US if asked to do so.

On Saturday however, a day after British Prime Minister Keir Starmer condemned his remarks as "appalling", Trump appeared to have changed position — at least as far as British troops were concerned. "The GREAT and very BRAVE soldiers of the United Kingdom will always be with the United States of America!" Trump said on his Truth Social platform.

"In Afghanistan, 457 died, many were badly injured, and they were among the greatest of all warriors. It's a bond too strong to ever be broken."

'Unacceptable'

But Britain was not the only Nato ally to have expressed anger at Trump's earlier remarks. "I fully understand that Danish veterans have said no words can describe how much this hurts," Danish Prime Minister Mette said on Facebook.

"It is unacceptable that the American president questions the commitment of allied soldiers in Afghanistan," she added. "Denmark is one of the Nato countries that has suffered the highest losses per capita," the Danish prime minister pointed out.

"These unacceptable comments are not worthy of response," the office of French President Emmanuel Macron said of Trump's dismissive remarks.

"It is to the families of fallen soldiers that the Head of State wishes to offer comfort and reiterate the nation's gratitude." Some 90 French soldiers died in Afghanistan, according to the French government.

Already on Friday, Starmer said: "I consider President Trump's remarks to be insulting and frankly, appalling, and I'm not surprised they've caused such hurt to the loved ones of those who were killed or injured."

The White House initially rejected Starmer's comments, defending Trump.

"President Trump is absolutely right — the United States of America has done more for Nato than any other country in the alliance has done combined," Taylor Rogers, a White House spokeswoman, said in a statement.

A 'heavy price'

Following the 9/11 attacks, Britain and a number of other allies joined the US from 2001 in Afghanistan after Washington — for the first time — invoked Nato's collective security clause.

As well as Britain, Denmark and France, troops from other Nato ally countries including Canada, Germany and Italy were also killed.

"Let us honour the 53 Italian soldiers who fell during the mission in Afghanistan," Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani said in a post on X on Saturday.

German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius recalled the "heavy price" his country paid, stressing that "our army was ready when our American allies asked for support" in 2001. "Many wounded are still suffering today from the physical and psychological consequences of that period," he added.

The Danish Veterans' Association said it was "at a loss for words" over Trump's claims. "Denmark has always stood by the United States, and we have shown up in crisis zones around the world when the United States asked us to," said a statement from the association.

Danish veterans are calling for a silent march in Copenhagen on Jan 31 to protest Trump's remarks. —AFP

A CAR is stuck in the snow in Little Rock, Arkansas.—AFP

Snow, ice hit western, central US as massive storm sweeps nation

HOUSTON: A massive winter storm dumped snow and freezing rain on New Mexico and Texas on Saturday as it spread across the United States towards the northeast, threatening tens of millions of Americans with blackouts, transportation chaos and bone-chilling cold.

Shoppers stripped supermarket shelves as the National Weather Service forecast huge snowfall in some areas and possibly "catastrophic" ice accumulations from freezing rain.

Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy warned that up to 240 million Americans could be affected by the storm. At least 16 states and the US capital Washington declared states of emergency.

"Take this storm seriously, folks," the National Weather Service said on X, predicting an "astonishingly long swath" of snowfall from New Mexico to Maine.

More than 3,400 flights in and out of the United States were canceled on Saturday alone, and more than 1,100 others were delayed, according to tracker FlightAware.

In Dallas, freezing rain pelted the city and temperatures plummeted to 21F (-6C).

Houston Mayor John Whitmire urged residents of the country's fourth most populous city to hunker down by late Saturday: "Be where you need to be for the next 72 hours."

State officials vowed that the Texas power grid was in better shape than five years ago, when it failed during a deadly winter storm and left millions without power.

Snow also hit Oklahoma and Arkansas, where some spots already recorded six inches (15 centimeters) on the ground, the NWS said.

After battering the country's southwest and central areas, the storm system was expected to hit the heavily populated mid-Atlantic and northeastern states before a frigid air mass settles in.—AFP

Trump threatens Canada with 100pc tariff

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump on Saturday warned Canada that if it concludes a trade deal with China, he will impose a 100 percent tariff on all goods coming over the border.

Relations between the United States and its northern neighbor have been rocky since Trump returned to the White House a year ago, with spats over trade and Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney decrying a "rupture" in the US-led global order.

During a visit to Beijing last week, Carney hailed a "new strategic partnership" with China that resulted in a "preliminary but landmark trade agreement" to reduce tariffs — but Trump warned of serious consequences should that deal be realised.

If Carney "thinks he is going to make Canada a 'Drop Off Port' for China to send goods and products into the United States, he is sorely mistaken," Trump wrote on his Truth Social platform. "China will eat Canada alive, completely devour it, including the destruction of their businesses, social fabric, and general way of life," he said.

"If Canada makes a deal with China, it will immediately be hit with a 100% Tariff against all Canadian goods and products coming into the USA." The two leaders have sharpened their rhetorical knives in recent days, beginning with Carney's speech on Tuesday at the World Economic Forum in Davos, where he earned a standing ovation for his frank assessment of a "rupture" in the US-led global order.

His comment was widely viewed as a reference to Trump's disruptive influence on international affairs, though the US leader was not mentioned by name.—AFP

AURORA borealis lights up the sky above a cathedral in Nuuk, Greenland.—AFP

Syria ceasefire with Kurdish forces expires amid uncertainty

Turkiye's pro-Kurd party urges end to Kobane siege

QAMISHLI: A four-day ceasefire between the Syrian government and Kurdish forces expired on Saturday night, with the truce's fate uncertain and both sides exchanging accusations of violations.

The ceasefire ended at 8pm, with Syrian troops and Kurdish forces massed on opposing sides of front lines around the last cluster of Kurdish-held cities.

The deadline given to the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces has expired, Syrian Information Minister Hamza al-Mustafa said. "The Syrian government affirms that it is now considering its next options," he added on X.

There was no immediate comment from the SDF on the ceasefire's fate. Government troops have seized swathes of northern and eastern territory in the last two weeks from the SDF in a rapid turn of events that has consolidated President Ahmed al-Sharaa's rule. Sharaa's forces were closing in on the last SDF strongholds earlier this week when he abruptly announced a ceasefire, giving them until Saturday night to lay down arms and come up with a plan to integrate with Syria's army — or to resume fighting.

Syria's Foreign Ministry denied reports that an agreement to extend the ceasefire had been reached, describing them as baseless. The ministry said there had been no "positive response" to the government's proposal, accusing the SDF of repeated violations of the truce.

The SDF said the government was moving towards escalation. "Military build-ups and logistical movements have been observed, clearly indicating an intent to escalate and push the region toward a new confrontation," the SDF said.

US shuttle diplomacy

The US has been engaging in shuttle diplomacy to establish a lasting ceasefire and facilitate the integration of the SDF — which for years was Washington's main partner in Syria — into the state led by its new favoured ally, Sharaa.

Senior US and French officials have urged Sharaa not to send his troops into remaining Kurdish-held areas, fearing renewed fighting, sources said.

Kobane siege

Turkiye's pro-Kurdish DEM party on Saturday called for the blockade on the Kurdish-majority city of Kobane to be lifted immediately, warning of a "humanitarian tragedy".

The situation in Kobane had escalated from a crisis into a "deadly catastrophe", DEM said after sending a delegation to visit northeastern Syria which has been targeted by a major Syrian military offensive.

The Kurdish-held city, also known as Ain al-Arab, is surrounded by the Turkish border to its north and government forces on all sides. It lies around 200km from the Kurds' stronghold in Syria's far northeast. "Both the military and humanitarian siege on Kobane must be lifted as soon as possible," said DEM co-chair Tulay Hatimogullari.—Agencies

Pope warns against risks of AI algorithms

VATICAN CITY: Pope Leo XIV on Saturday stressed the risks of generative artificial intelligence, how it could usurp human identities and relationships, influence public opinion and deepen social polarisation.

In a message marking the World Day of Social Communications, the pope said AI systems reflect the worldview of their creators and can shape patterns of thought by reproducing biases embedded in the data they process. "The challenge... is a matter of protecting human identity and authentic relationships," the pontiff said.

Leo XIV's warning comes as generative AI makes leaps and bounds towards replicating, altering and manufacturing images, music and text to levels sometimes indistinguishable from human-made works.

In 2023, Leo's predecessor, pope Francis, was the subject of a viral fake AI image of him wearing a white puffer jacket.—AFP

Iran thanks Pakistan for 'strong support' at UN rights council

KARACHI: Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi on Saturday thanked his Pakistani counterpart Ishaq Dar for his "strong support" and Pakistan's position at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) amid the prevailing tense situation between Washington and Tehran.

On Friday, the UNHRC adopted a resolution — with 25 votes in favour, seven against and 14 abstentions — to extend the mandate of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Iran for two years.

Pakistan, along with China and India, voted against the resolution.

In a post on X on Saturday, the Foreign Office (FO) said Mr Dar received a call from Mr Araghchi thanking the former for "his strong support and Pakistan's position at the UNHRC in Geneva, including its call for a vote as well as voting against the resolution concerning Iran".

Ties with UAE

In Dubai, Mr Dar expressed Pakistan's strong commitment to collaborate closely with the UAE to enhance bilateral economic relations and open new avenues for investment, trade and joint ventures, according to *Radio Pakistan*.

He made the remarks during his meeting with Chairman of the Department of Finance Abu Dhabi Jassem Mohammed Bu Ataba Al Zaabi.

Both sides agreed to "pursue joint efforts" to resolve outstanding matters, including issues related to the operations of PTCL. The officials also discussed expanding UAE investments in Pakistan to enhance bilateral economic relations. —Monitoring Desk

Iraq's majority bloc backs Nouri al-Maliki as next PM

BAGHDAD: Iraq's main Shia alliance, which holds a parliamentary majority, endorsed on Saturday former prime minister and power-broker Nouri al-Maliki as the country's next premier.

The Coordination Framework, an alliance of Shiite factions with varying links to Iran, said in a statement that it "decided, by majority vote, to nominate" Maliki for the position "as the candidate of the largest parliamentary bloc".

"After in-depth and extensive discussion, the Coordination Framework decided by majority vote to nominate Mr Maliki for the position of prime minister, as the candidate of the largest parliamentary bloc, based on his political and administrative experience and his role in managing the state," the framework said.

"The Coordination Framework affirms its full commitment to the constitutional process and its keenness to work with all national forces to form a strong and effective government capable of confronting challenges, providing services, and protecting Iraq's security and unity," the framework said.—Agencies

Scotland replace Bangladesh in T20 World Cup

Continued from Page 1

Indian Premier League franchise Kolkata Knight Riders to release Bangladesh fast bowler Mustafizur Rahman.

Bangladesh responded by banning IPL broadcasts in the country and demanding to play World Cup matches in Sri Lanka. Mustafizur's removal followed online outrage by right-wing Indian Hindus who invoked alleged attacks on a fellow community in Bangladesh. Dhaka maintains that Indian media has exaggerated the scale of the violence.

Bangladesh will hold elections during the tournament, its first since a mass uprising in 2024 toppled then-prime minister Sheikh Hasina, an ally of New Delhi. Political relations have since soured between Bangladesh and India, where Hasina fled after she was ousted.

The standoff mirrors previous tensions in South Asian cricket.

For the Champions Trophy last year, the Indian cricket board (BCCI) stuck to its policy of not touring Pakistan because of the strained political ties between the bitter neighbours, who play each other only in ICC events.

Like for the 2023 Asia Cup in Pakistan, a 'hybrid model' was agreed on under which India were allowed to play their Champions Trophy matches in Dubai to salvage the tournament.

Under the agreement running until 2027, Pakistan will play in a neutral venue for any ICC event, including the T20 World Cup where they are scheduled to play their matches in Sri Lanka.

PM's return awaited

Mohsin Naqvi said PCB's stance on the situation would be according to instructions provided by the government. "Bangladesh has been treated unfairly," he told reporters. "I said the same in the board meeting of the ICC. You cannot have double standards, where one country can make whatever decision whenever and do the total opposite for another country.

"That is why we have taken the stand that Bangladesh is being treated unfairly and should be allowed to play the World Cup in any case. They are major stakeholders [in world cricket] and this injustice should not be done.

"We are waiting for the prime minister to return [from Davos] before making a final decision." He was of the view that Bangladesh should have benefited from a similar 'hybrid' arrangement as between India and Pakistan. "… Bangladesh is the same member as Pakistan. And our stance is that if you have done this favour with Pakistan and India, then you should do the same with Bangladesh," he said. "The main reason for this is that one country cannot dictate to another. And if this dictation is attempted, then Pakistan definitely has its own stance."

Asked whether there was a "Plan B" for a scenario in which Pakistan would also not play the T20 World Cup, he quipped, "Let the decision come first; we have Plan A, B, C, D."

Additional input by Reuters/AFP

Cocaine lab explosion kills 9 in Colombia

BOGOTA: A cocaine laboratory explosion killed nine people on Colombia's Pacific coast, police said.

The blast happened in southwest Narino department in a cocaine-producing area inhabited by the Indigenous Awa people and rife with illegal armed groups.

Eight people were wounded.

These victims worked for the National Coordinator Bolivarian Army, a renegade faction of the now defunct FARC guerrilla group.

A preliminary investigation found a gas cylinder exploded while being used to make the drug, police colonel John Jairo Urrea told local media via video. "Due to human error and the handling of gas cylinders... the place went up in flames in a matter of seconds," the renegade group said in a statement.

It rejected a 2016 peace agreement with the FARC that ended decades of fighting, and remains in talks with the leftist government of President Gustavo Petro. The region where the lab blew up has been crucial to cocaine trafficking to the United States for decades, and drug smugglers have strengthened their local control with the help of Mexican cartels.—AFP

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